

ON SYLLABUS DESIGN*

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In an article published 7 years ago (Bravo, 1977), I undertook to answer the question 'What is applied linguistics?' as an introduction to a more extended discussion of the tasks which an applied linguist is supposed to undertake. This paper is meant to retake the question.

Although not explicitly, the distinction was made in the first paper between a teacher and an applied linguist, and I would elaborate on that now. Basically working for the same objective, their approach is not at all the same. The teacher deals with questions of 'What for, what and how to teach?' from the point of view of a reduced universe, a microcosmos he knows well: his class, a group within his class, an individual, etc. This is his starting point and he has to be pragmatic. But he does not disregard theory, he models his teaching on sound theories of language, language learning and language teaching. If his theory does not work, his theory is wrong and he substitutes another theory. His findings apply to his microcosmos; whether they could apply to a macrocosmos too would have to be found out; meanwhile, his success or failure remains local.

The applied linguist works for a macrocosmos which, even though he may have a good idea about, he does not know well: a school, a number of schools, a city, a country, the world. Because his findings must be relevant to this macrocosmos as a whole, he must make recourse to theory, but because of his experience as a teacher and his (partial) knowledge of his macrocosmos, his theoretical flights are bridled by reality. In his search, he revises the theoretical field and tries to find theoretically valid answers; these must then be tested in search of statistically significant results. Anything else, anything which has not been rigorously tested is, and this should be remembered, merely anecdotal.

This is an applied linguist's paper, a purely academic exercise in imagination so far, with Mexican secondary schools as its universe. I blatantly and brazenly, once and for all, apologise to orthodox teaching

* To the memory of Gelia, who would have felt distinguished, delighted and dutifully doubtful.

for the unorthodox implications which are the natural outcome of it, and which once again prove that there is nothing new under the sun¹.

The teaching of English taken for granted, our universe being Mexican secondary schools, and our intent to speculate on the hypothetical design of an English teaching syllabus, we start by asking, 'What goal should the learner attain by it?'²

The applied linguist speculates. Language is readily definable as a means of communication, and a possible goal could be that the learner learn English as a means of communication, the model of attainment being the native speaker of the language. This, of course, admits to degrees, but we could tentatively set up our goal as the learner's ability to use the language 'reasonably like a native'³

With this goal in mind, speculation takes on the content and organization of the syllabus: if communication is the goal, then the syllabus should teach the student either what is necessary or useful to accomplish it. What sort of syllabus can this be? There are several alternatives, and a review must be made of them:

Grammatical or structural syllabuses are aimed at the communicative goal tentatively set up above, but there are serious theoretical reasons to believe that such a goal is unattainable by them. Firstly, we cannot teach our Mexican secondary school students what is necessary. By necessary must be understood the language which will enable the learner to accomplish, through the foreign language, the goals imposed on him by his real-life needs. But the secondary school student in Mexico has no foreign-language needs, except those imposed on him by the requirement that he should pass three courses of English. So, language in a grammatical syllabus is chosen not because it is necessary, but because of other reasons, mainly because it is 'basic'.

¹ The reader will be able to trace the ideas of Dakin (1973), Wilkins (1976), and others throughout this paper.

² We should take the learner's opinion into consideration before answering, but we can't. The teacher can, but he doesn't. So, the goal which a syllabus is aimed at, is decided in his stead and on his behalf merely on the basis of the Tory's argument (Carroll, 1865 p. 43).

³ It is not difficult to set up an informal scale and choose from there: like a native, almost like a native, reasonably like a native, not quite like a native, not at all like a native, etc. What is not so easy is to define that level in terms of linguistic and sociolinguistic achievement. But this would have to be done.

Secondly, and by the same token, we cannot teach useful language either. By useful must be understood the language which would enable the learner to accomplish goals imposed on him by future needs. By definition, language can only be specifically useful, i.e. useful for specific purposes. Now even ignoring the great majority of students who will never have foreign-language needs, we do not know what specific needs the remaining minority will have in four or five years. Even if we did, we know that different language needs would require different language content, and so different syllabuses. We must conclude that we cannot teach useful English either. Structural or grammatical syllabuses become catalogues of the 'basic' structures of the language, its 'grammatical core'. The language in them was chosen because it was basic, not because it was necessary or useful. Structures are taught merely because they are in the syllabus, and teaching the syllabus becomes an end in itself. Students in secondary schools very easily lose interest in learning, and when such is the case, the responsibility which should be the students' becomes the teacher's: he is the sole agent responsible for his students' achievement. Teachers are better and better trained everyday, but because the syllabus is a dead albatross instead of a powerful instrument for motivation, they have to fight this battle with only one weapon, their teaching techniques. No wonder, many succumb.

Thirdly, the native speaker's proficiency can be summarised in two words: linguistic creativity and appropriacy. By creativity is meant his ability to understand what is spoken to him, even things he has never spoken before. To do so, he must have acquired grammatical competence. By appropriacy is meant his ability to put this mastery to use in a social context; his utterances must be appropriate and effective to accomplish his communicative intentions with other speakers. To do so, he must have mastered the social conventions which govern usage in his language, i.e. he must have acquired communicative competence. This proficiency, these two kinds of competence, is what the learner of a foreign language must acquire if he is to communicate successfully with speakers of that language. (Besides, like a native speaker, he must be literate in it. But never mind questions of reading and writing for the moment). But grammatical syllabuses are not the best instruments to acquire proficiency due to their synthetic approach.

A synthetic syllabus is one in which "the different parts of language are taught separately and step-by-step so that acquisition is a process of gradual accumulation of the parts until the whole structure of the language has been built up" (Wilkins, 1976-2). There are several effects of a synthetic syllabus on the teaching and learning situation:

In theory, the learner acquires (if he does) full grammatical competence, but only where the whole syllabus has been mastered (if it is), provided it contains all the language necessary to master the

whole grammatical system of the language (which no syllabus contains). In practice, the learner, in learning the 'basic' structures learns to utter only the language he has been taught ('structurespeak') in the situations in which it was taught to him ('parroting'). His communicative intentions (if he has any) are always ahead of his mastery of the grammatical means to realise them, and for as long as his courses last, he talks like a drill. This is what grammatical syllabuses call 'communication' (but isn't). Furthermore, it does not help motivation either.

In order to identify the language items which will go into a grammatical syllabus (selection), the language as a whole has to be broken down (analysed) into its basic components or structures. It is the students' task to put the language together again (synthesize), but he will generally be incapable of doing it, not for lack of intelligence or ability, but for lack of a model on which to do it: grammatical syllabuses usually do not provide for, or require that any real-life language be presented to the learner. On the contrary, due to its step-by-step, one-structure-at-a-time approach which is meant to prevent the learner making mistakes, real language has to be kept out. Thus native-speaker visitors, films, songs, rhymes, recorded conversations, radio broadcasts, etc. are never brought into the classroom, and if they are, it is for purposes other than providing a model on which to base synthesis. In other words, the student does not know what he should aim at in terms of understanding and speaking the language. The fact that he is left to do his synthesis all by himself does not require any further comment.

A fourth point is that grammatical syllabuses are incomplete. It is well known that linguistic forms are most times semantically complex; and yet, as a rule, in grammatical syllabuses they are presented in a one-to-one correspondence with meaning, i.e. as if one form had only one meaning. Present progressive, for example, is presented as the 'now' form, but not as a perfectly valid future or habitual. Whatever the reasons for this, the result is the same, "language learning is not complete when the content of a grammatical syllabus has been mastered" (Wilkins, p.cit. p. 8).

Another form of incompleteness in a grammatical syllabus is its lack of proviso for the teaching of social meaning. A given structure has grammatical form and grammatical meaning, but it also has a use or social meaning. By this is meant the communicative functions it serves the speaker in his interaction with other speakers. The present progressive form, in its 'habitual' meaning can be used, for example, to reproach, "He's always doing that". A grammatical syllabus, then, is without proviso for the teaching and acquisition of communicative competence. Practical reasons-lack of time, excessive number of students, unqualified teachers, etc. - have been rightly dismissed here; what has

been said is theoretically valid and must be enough to conclude that a communicative goal is unattainable through grammatical syllabuses. Naturally, the applied linguist looks for alternatives, or rather, because of his previous speculations, and choices being scarce, certain characteristics of an alternative syllabus are forced on him. This syllabus should be motivating, should not be synthetic, and should be complete, ie should aim at both grammatical and communicative competence.

There already exist syllabuses partially like this. Notional syllabuses, for example, aim at both types of competence and are not synthetic. Their content is based on the previously identified, supposedly universal needs of the learner and of the linguistic forms which can satisfy them. Thus they are catalogues of needs and means. If the learner agrees with the catalogue (needs and means go together making communication a reality from the very beginning), he will be highly motivated as well; he may even become proficient in the language. But if he does not, the change would have been from a dead albatross to another and, again, the teaching of the syllabus would become an end in itself. Notice this similarity between notional and grammatical syllabuses: both impose an input on the learner, and both expect the learner's output to be the same as the input. In other words, both sell themselves as the satisfactors for the needs they themselves create. This is clearly circular: the teaching of the syllabus becomes an end in itself again.

If this reasoning is sound, a notional syllabus is not motivating in itself, and if this is to be avoided, circularity must be broken: the syllabus must be a stimulus, the response to which must be the learner's intention to communicate: the learner must want to say something first. In terms of our secondary school student, this amounts to letting him decide what his actual response to the syllabus will be, ie letting him tell us what he wants to say, and then, teaching him precisely that. The teacher must be ready to identify his students' communicative intentions (perhaps with the help of a catalogue) and willing to teach them the linguistic means to express them (perhaps, again, with the help of a catalogue).

No one has ever tried to teach our student what he wants to learn, but it is inevitable that to teach him according to his desires would be highly motivating. The condition is that language needs are not assumed in him, but by artifice created in him by the syllabus. Only starting from real needs (those which the learner implicitly or explicitly volunteers) can a dead albatross become alive.

In Mexico, indeed, albatrosses abound. These are syllabuses especially designed to cater to Mexican students' actual specific needs. The term ESP, English for Special or Specific Purposes, refers

to this approach. A given variety of language is taught by means of an ad hoc ESP syllabus whose goal is more reduced than full communication, but is more specific; it usually involves reading comprehension. This is being done at university level where the student already knows what he wants to learn. Such is not the case with our secondary school student, and the same reservations should be made about ESP as have been made about notional syllabuses.

Except for situational syllabuses which can be lumped together with the others on the grounds that they represent no actual needs of the students, most reputable alternatives have been discussed so far; the applied linguist might comfortably choose the lesser evil and produce an actual syllabus for secondary schools in México. Or he might go on speculating.

I have suggested that a syllabus, if it is to motivate the learner to learn, must, by artifice, create real language needs in him. But I want to take a further step. In terms of Bloom's well-known taxonomy of educational objectives, we have been emphasizing the achievement of cognitive-domain objectives by the students and virtually ignoring the other two. This has led to evaluation problems and much frustration in both teachers and learners. I suggest that this should be changed: our primary aim should not be that the secondary school student learn English (cognitive domain), but that he should love English (affective domain). But loving should be active, he must want to possess it, just like any lover would. Learning should be made second to, and second after, loving and wanting to learn. I will go even beyond this: learning should be regarded as (merely) incidental (and -- naturally -- inevitable) to loving. After all, anecdotes about people learning anyway and in spite of everything refer, it must be remembered, to people who wanted to learn.

If motivation is achieved by creating real-language needs in the students, completeness is achieved by teaching the students the grammatically correct, communicatively appropriate means to satisfy them. This defines a student-teacher syllabus. The student should contribute his implicitly or explicitly stated communicative intentions which should be taken as the only source of real language needs; the teacher should contribute an instrument to elicit the student's intentions, as well as the teaching of the linguistic means necessary for the student to realise them. Now, not even God can be loved before he is known, neither could we love Miss Universe from an X-ray. Nor can English be loved from structures. If structures are dropped as a means of introducing the student to the beauties of English, the alternatives are scant: we cannot go below the sentence, we have to go above it into discourse. The synthetic approach must be dropped and the teaching of discourse substituted for it.

The student-teacher syllabus, then, is envisaged as a catalogue of texts, needs and means. (By 'text' must be understood any stretch of

language which is a self-contained whole). The needs and means catalogue is meant to be classificatory; its function would be to help the teacher more easily identify his students' language needs and the linguistic means to satisfy them. But the content and the ordering of the teaching must be decided on the students' real needs. Texts are meant for elicitation of the students' communicative intentions. They should be used as a means of presentation of the language to the student. Notice communication is usefully divided into two moments: understanding and speaking. The need to understand the text would be the first moment of real communication. The second moment would come with the student's intention to ask questions, make comments, repeat the text, etc. (Notice he would have a global model to aim at). Methodological ingenuity, of which our teachers abound, would be necessary to have the students take this second step, but methodology is not being considered here.

If motivation alone were accomplished, this would amount to a revolution in teaching practices in Mexico: that the students had a reason of their own to want to learn English. It is an anti-climax to say that very little can be accomplished without that. By this mere change of attitude in the students, all the resources known to teachers, and those as yet unknown, would for the first time be put at the service of the student's interests, not the syllabus's. But no more egg-counting.

Even in outline, a syllabus like this can be found fault with. But I will leave that to the reader's imagination. One problem I will mention, though. At only three years of a really brave effort to improve the teaching of English by means of a new syllabus and new (or newly re-trained) teachers, I am actually suggesting that everything start anew and that questions of goals, content and organization be considered again-and reconsidered. This is not to diminish the new syllabus: any teacher, old enough (in the profession) will be willing to swear that he has not seen better syllabuses or better books to go with them than those in use at present; I agree. By comparison with the past, there has been no better in Mexico by comparison with the future or the ideal, there is always room for improvement, even if this is nothing more than a discussion on syllabuses caused by the presentation of something so ethereal and unorthodox like the design of a hypothetical syllabus which has been made here. This paper was presented as an exercise in imagination, and by this is meant not only the writer's. It is now the reader's turn. This paper is a stimulus, the response to which must be decided by him.

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